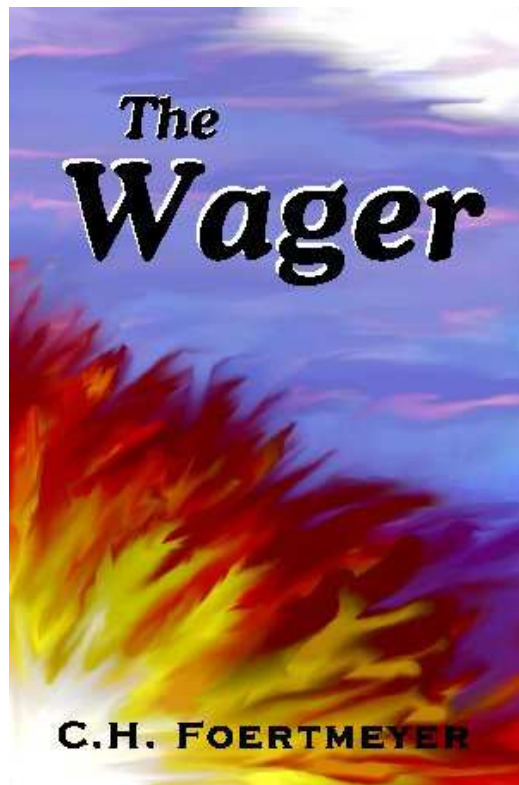


# The Wager



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# **The Wager**

**C.H. Foertmeyer**

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"...Behold, all that he hath  
*is* in thy power; only upon  
himself put not forth thine  
hand."

## Chapter One

It started innocently enough for Nick Hines. Less than a year ago, three hundred and fifteen days ago to be exact, Nick was a successful hardware store owner, living a good life in Montrose, Tennessee. Three hundred and fifteen days ago, he had a nice home, a wife, and two children. But, three hundred and fifteen days ago, things began to change for Nick. The events did not happen overnight; it would take time to evolve completely—three hundred and fifteen days; just forty-five weeks before he would find himself standing at the brink.

March 28, 2005, marked Nick's thirtieth birthday, which began as any other day had in his recent work-a-day life. He was up early, at five a.m., well ahead of the rest of his family, as dictated by the life of a hardware store owner. It was by choice that he opened his store at seven o'clock sharp, every morning except Sunday. He chose to do so out of the necessity of staying ahead of the competition, the larger box stores in nearby Chesterville. "The early bird gets the worm," he was fond of saying, something he had picked up from his father, and his father before him. Nick was the third generation owner of Hines Hardware.

There were no special plans for Nick's birthday; it would be pretty much like all that had preceded it. Gayle would have a butterscotch marble cake baked for him when he got home from work, as well as his favorite pistachio ice cream. They would eat dinner and then he, Gayle and the kids, would have a small party to present Nick with his gifts. It would be a plain and simple affair, just like every other year; just the way Nick liked it to be. After a full day at the hardware, he would be far too tired for much else anyway. Eleven hours of selling nuts, bolts, hinges, and chicken wire was a lot more tiring than anyone who had never worked retail would imagine, and at the end of the day, it was always his feet that barked the loudest.

But, today he was fresh and feeling rejuvenated, as he did every Monday morning following his only day off each week. On Sundays, the store was open from noon until four, Levi Bergmann running the place for Nick. Nick, in turn, ran the store every Saturday so Levi could observe the Jewish Sabbath.

Religion played a large role in both men's lives, but of the two, Nick was the most heavily involved in his church and its charitable endeavors. Nick never missed church on Sundays, and he never passed up an opportunity to do charitable work through the church. When the church needed repair, Nick was the one who always donated the paint, lumber, or hardware to make it happen. And, he wasn't just free with his materials, but his

time as well, spending many a Sunday afternoon and evening, doing repairs to the old church building, or out doing repairs to an elderly member's home. Yes, religion played a large role in both men's lives, but never so much so as it would in Nick's life—over the next three hundred and fifteen days.

By six, Nick was pulling out of his farm drive and onto County Road 47, driving toward Montrose along his usual route to town. The Hines family had always lived in the same place after Nick's ancestors had moved west from the Carolinas in 1880. His great-great grandfather, a pig farmer, had purchased the land and cleared it, and by 1885 he had a thriving pork business established, fifteen miles outside of Montrose. His great grandfather had carried on the tradition, which actually had started in the Carolinas in the early 1800's, and grew it into an even larger and more profitable concern. But, as could happen with any family business, Nick's grandfather was not the least bit interested in raising pigs, no matter how lucrative it had been for their family over the years. No, he wanted to own his own hardware store, and to work in town, far away from the pig slop and wallows. So, he sold his breeding stock and customer base to another livestock farm in the area, purchased a storefront in Montrose, and Hines Hardware was founded two months later, in the spring of 1935.

From the farmhouse into town was about a fifteen-minute drive, as most people would drive it, but Nick liked to savor the morning and the solitude of his car. His routine called for leaving the farm at six and arriving at the store at six thirty, in plenty of time to be open by seven. Any day but Saturday, it really didn't matter anyway, because Levi would already be at the hardware and have it open when he arrived, even if he arrived as early as six fifteen. Levi lived above the storefront, in an apartment Nick rented to him cheap, as part of his compensation for *managing* the store. In reality, Nick managed everything, but Levi liked the title of "manager" better than he did "clerk", so Nick went along with it whenever the question arose. Nick even went so far as to say to customers, upon occasion and when Levi was within earshot, "I don't know when those will be in. You'll have to check with my manager," and then he would point to Levi. Of course, it was strictly for Levi's benefit that he did such things, and it always made Levi beam with pride.

Nick and Levi had known each other ever since kindergarten, and they had been *good* friends ever since second grade at Montrose Elementary. But unlike Nick, Levi was not blessed with a sharp mind, and being a store clerk was all that he had ever aspired to be. Nick had given him the chance to be that, and had been gracious enough to allow him to be, in his own eyes, so

much more. He was a *manager*, and because of that opportunity, he was committed and dedicated to Nick, and his store, for life. Where else but Hines Hardware could a man of limited ability, and Levi knew his limitations well, rise to the position of manager? Where else but Hines Hardware would he ever find a friend like Nick? These were the thoughts that motivated Levi to arrive early every morning, and stay late every evening. He'd do no different if he happened to live twenty miles away, instead of just upstairs.

Nick pulled into Montrose right on schedule, at six thirty, catching the town's only traffic light on red, which was rather strange and totally unexpected. The signal facing Route 47 only turned red if a car had pulled up to the opposing signal on High Street, High being the far less traveled street. But as Nick slowed to a stop, he noticed no cars waiting on High Street. *Huh, must be malfunctioning*, he thought, as he considered just going on about his way. As he looked again, to be sure the way was clear, he spotted someone walking toward him along High Street. *That's Jerry Smith*, he thought, realizing that he hadn't seen Jerry since high school.

"Hey Jerry!" he yelled to his old classmate. "Jerry, it's me, Nick! Nick Hines!"

Jerry didn't so much as bat an eye, let alone respond to Nick's hailing him. He simply walked on a few more feet, keeping his eyes on the ground, and then turned into the alley behind the storefronts along Main Street.

"That's weird," Nick mumbled. "Maybe he didn't hear me."

Nick and Jerry had been good friends during their school years; in fact, Jerry was one of the few kids Nick actually liked. Jerry had always treated Levi with respect, never once using the moniker "Dimwit", as all the other kids did when referring to, or addressing Levi. Treating Levi with respect was prerequisite to being one of Nick's friends, and there were no two ways about it.

Nick made a quick left turn, ignoring the still red light, and then pulled into the alley off High Street. He saw Jerry nowhere. He drove slowly down the alley, checking behind every dumpster as he passed, but to no avail; Jerry had vanished. *What the heck?* Nick thought. *How could he disappear so quickly-and to where?* He drove down the rest of the alley, emerging onto Oak Street, and then took a right back to Main Street. Two minutes later he was parking behind his store, noting the lights turned on inside. Levi, as usual, was already on the job, and probably already open for business.

As he entered the hardware through the rear entrance, Levi saw him before he saw Levi.

"A little late this morning, Nicky. Car trouble?" Levi asked, startling Nick, who had no idea Levi was behind him in the seed crib.

"Oh, Levi, good morning, I didn't see you there. No, no car trouble. I was actually looking for an old friend of ours. You remember Jerry Smith, don't you?"

"Oh yes, Jerry. I remember him. He was nice to me. But, why are you looking for him? He does not live here anymore."

"He doesn't? Where does he live then; do you know?"

"He moved to Chesterville with his mom when his dad died. I know, 'cause my mom and his mom are good friends. My mom told me about it."

"Well, I just saw him over on High Street, walking down the sidewalk. He turned down the alley behind the Main Street stores, and I lost him. I yelled to him, but he didn't answer, and then he disappeared down the alley."

"That was not him," Levi stated, with absolute conviction.

"How can you be so sure of that?" Nick asked, noting the certainty in Levi's voice.

"Jerry cannot walk, Nicky. He was hurt in a car wreck a few years ago, and he cannot walk anymore. My mom told me about it. You did not know that?"

"No, I haven't heard anything about Jerry in years. I'm sorry to hear that, though. He was always one of the good guys. Is your mom still in touch with his mom?"

"Yes."

"Well, the next time you talk to your mom, ask her to say hello to Jerry from me, okay?"

"Sure, Nicky, but you could call him yourself you know. I can get you the number."

"Yeah, do that for me. Maybe I will give him a call sometime. But, I'll tell you one thing; if that wasn't him I saw this morning, it was sure his double. He even walked like Jerry, with that little hitch-step, remember?"

"Yeah, that was from when he fell out of his grandfather's barn loft and broke his leg. They did not fix it right. The guy you saw this morning had a walk like that?"

"Yep, he sure did; *just* like that."

"Well, it still cannot be Jerry. He is in a wheelchair my mom told me, and *forever* she said."

"Okay, so that's that, but when you talk to your mom again, ask her if Jerry is still in that wheelchair."

"Okay."

"So, are we open for business up front?"

"Sure, Nicky. We have been open for over a half-hour. You know that."

Nick smiled at Levi, and roughed his hair.

"Yeah, I guess I do, buddy. The only days we're *not* open early are Saturdays."

Levi smiled. He knew what that meant, and he appreciated Nick saying it. The truth be known, Levi would probably work for Nick for no more than room, board, and just once a day, a smile and a pat on the back.

Shortly after seven, the first of the day's customers began arriving, and from that point on there was little time to dwell on the sighting of Jerry Smith, or his double, as the case may be. But think about it, Nick did. He had known Jerry well, very well, and if that wasn't Jerry he had seen, then Jerry had a twin brother that no one, including Jerry's own parents, knew about. *No, that's impossible*, Nick thought. *So, what then?*

Nick plodded through the day, with Levi's help, cutting window glass, installing screening in screen doors, sharpening lawn mower blades, and selling nuts, bolts, and nails to one customer after another. Between the departure of one customer and the arrival of the next, he thought about Jerry. Finally, late in the day, he stumbled onto the thought that people don't change that much over twelve years, but they *do* change. And that's when he realized that if that *had been* Jerry he had seen, he hadn't changed *at all*. That realization put Nick's thoughts of Jerry to rest. There was no way it could have been Jerry he had seen on High Street, because the person he had seen there was a kid, no more than seventeen or eighteen years of age. Jerry, of course, would be thirty now, just like him. *So, that's that*, he thought, but still, *that hitch-step-that limp*.

Ordinarily, there was no place Nick would rather be than the hardware store. But today, the day dragged on as if it would never end, his thoughts continually migrating back to Jerry, his mind still seeking an explanation for what he had seen. The more he tried to convince himself otherwise, the more his subconscious insisted his eyes had not lied to him. He *had* seen Jerry Smith, not a day older than he had been the last time he had seen him, nearly twelve years ago. It *had* been the *same* Jerry Smith he had just seen, hobbling down High Street in worn out blue jeans and a white T-shirt, just like Jerry used to wear nearly everyday. Convinced, as his rational mind was that Levi was right, that it couldn't possibly be Jerry, Nick's transient thoughts couldn't stop visiting the question, and leave it alone.

Eventually, six p.m. arrived and Nick was totally exhausted, more his mind than his body, but spent nonetheless. Levi had noticed Nick's preoccupation throughout the day, and now he could see the weariness in his friend's eyes.

"You go on ahead to home," he told Nick, "and I will close up in a little while."

"Thanks, Levi. For some reason I'm just bushed."

"Well, go on home then, and if you want to come in late tomorrow, you know I can handle things until you get here."

"I know you can, Levi, but I don't think that'll be necessary. I just need a good night's sleep I think, but thanks for offering."

Nick started to walk to the rear exit of the store, and then turned back to Levi.

"Levi, do you think you could maybe give your mom a call tonight and have her check on Jerry Smith? Ask her to see if he's still in that wheelchair. Okay?"

"Sure, Nicky, but I am sure he is. She told me before that it was *forever*."

"I know, Levi, but miracles happen you know. Maybe Jerry got one somehow."

"Okay, I will call her tonight, and then I will call you and tell you after I hear back from her."

"No, that's okay. Just tell me in the morning. I'm going straight home, eat my cake and ice cream, and then go straight to bed."

"Cake and ice cream?" Levi asked, a puzzled look on his face.

Nick smiled, and said, "Today's my birthday, Levi."

"Oh, happy birthday, Nicky. I am sorry I forgot-*again*."

"It's okay, Levi. Nobody can remember everything they'd like to. I'll see you in the morning, buddy."

Back behind the wheel of his car, Nick paused a moment before turning the key. He took a deep breath, and blew it out slowly through pursed lips. He couldn't remember a day, ever, when he had been so tired at the end of the day. *We weren't any busier than usual*, he thought, as he turned the ignition key. But, he knew his mind had been busier than usual, and he knew why, every spare moment of the day having been spent dwelling on Jerry Smith. *Why?* he wondered, but he had no definitive answer to that troublesome question.

He backed out of his parking space and turned left onto Elm, before taking a right on Main, still preoccupied with thoughts of Jerry. As he approached Oak Street, the urge to drive down the alley again, just one more time, became compulsion. He hung a right onto Oak and then a left into the service alley, proceeding slowly, checking again behind each dumpster he came to. By the time he reached the end of the alley he had seen nothing that would indicate the presence of his old friend, Jerry. *What a lark*, he thought, as he turned left onto High Street. *Nothing-So, what did you expect, dummy?* A block later, he caught the red light at the intersection of Main and

High. He reached over and clicked on his radio, stretched his arms above his head, and glanced into his rearview mirror.

"What the hell?" he blurted out, as his eyes focused on a boy in his teens, wearing blue jeans and a white T-shirt, limping out of the alley and turning away from him down High Street. *Jerry?* Nick thought, immediately questioning his eyes, but noticing the hitch-step he had become so familiar with years ago. He threw the car into reverse and began backing up, keeping his eye on the teenager limping away from him. As he closed ground between them, the boy reached Church Street and turned right.

Nick gunned the car across Church, hit the brakes, threw it into drive, and turned down Church. He proceeded about a hundred feet down the street before coming to a complete stop, looking every which way for any sign of the boy. He was gone-again. "Damn!" he blurted out, pounding his fist down on the steering wheel. "Where the hell could he have gone?" He scanned both sides of the street again, but saw no sign of the teen. He was about to give it up and head for home, when his rational mind kicked back into gear with a memory from the past. He was staring at the street sign at the corner of Oak and Church, when it came to him. *Jerry had lived on Church Street, at the far south end.*

Nick knew the house; he had been there a number of times with Jerry. He stomped down on the accelerator, squealing his tires, and flew down Church at twice the legal speed limit of twenty-five miles per hour. He ran the stop signs at Elm, Maple, and Walnut Streets before slowing down slightly, in Jerry's old block. He watched on the right for Jerry's house, and when he spotted it, he slammed on the brakes, skidding to a stop at the curb. He looked up onto the large front porch of the house, and his jaw dropped to his chest. Sitting on a glider was the teenager; the Jerry look-alike, he had been chasing.

Nick stared in disbelief. *How the hell did he get this far that fast-and on foot no less?* He flung open his car door and stepped out into the street, keeping his eye on the boy that he shouldn't vanish again. He rounded the front of his car, stepped up the curb, and started across the front lawn. The boy remained, rocking slowly, back and forth on the glider. He closed to within twenty feet of the porch before the boy looked directly at him and smiled. Nick froze in his tracks. *That is Jerry,* but his mind couldn't believe what he was seeing. It was exactly as if he were back in high school and stopping by to visit his old friend. It was Jerry, and he didn't appear to be a day over seventeen.

He started to take another step forward, when suddenly, he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned, startled, and found himself staring into the face of Sheriff Coffey.

"That was some pretty crazy drivin' back there, Nick. Where's the fire?"

"Oh hi, Sam. No fire, I was just in a hurry to get here, to the Smith's house."

"This ain't the Smith's house anymore, Nick; it's the Donovan's, and what was the big hurry anyway? You were doin' at least fifty down Church Street and I saw you run at least two stop signs. So, what's the big hurry?"

"I was trying to catch up with Jerry."

"Jerry, Jerry who?"

"Jerry Smith. He's right up there on the porch," Nick said, turning and pointing to the *empty* glider.

"Nick, are you all right? There's no one there, and Jerry Smith hasn't lived here in years. Maybe I better drive you home; you don't look so good."

"No, Sam, I *know* Jerry doesn't live here anymore, and I'm fine. But, I saw him walking down High Street and then turn onto Church. I just thought he might be heading here, to his old house, that's all. And, he was. I just saw him up on the porch; just a minute ago, before you got here."

"Nick, I haven't seen Jerry in years, probably ten or more, but I *do* know this. He's not walkin' *anywhere*. He's a paraplegic and confined to a wheelchair. He has been for about five years now, ever since he drove his car into a tree between here and Chesterville. I was at the scene of the accident. Jerry was lucky to have even lived through it."

"You're sure of that; that he's permanently paralyzed?"

"Yes, quite sure."

Nick began thinking over his situation. He knew Sam probably thought he had flipped out, and had they not known each other for years, he'd probably be on his way to jail right now.

"Tell me, Sam; do the Donovan's have a teenage son, maybe seventeen or eighteen years old?"

"Yeah they do. His name is Rich, and he's a handful, but an okay kid, all in all."

"Does he look anything like Jerry did in high school?"

"Maybe at a distance, they both have that flamin' red hair, but you can tell 'em apart up close."

"Does he have a limp, like Jerry did?"

"Ordinarily, no, but recently, yes. He plays on the same ball team with my boy, Eric. Last week, at practice, Rich sprained his ankle slidin' into second base."

"Which ankle?"

"Which ankle? Nick, what's up with all these questions? What difference does it make which ankle?"

"Humor me, Sam. Which ankle?"

"The right ankle, okay? Anything else you *need* to know?"

"No, Sam, that's all. Thanks, and don't worry about me, I'll be fine. Okay if I go home now? I'm just really beat."

"Sure, go on home. I'll mail you your citations."

"Citations?"

"Yeah, speedin', and failure to observe two stop signs. I could add reckless drivin', but bein' as you're a *pillar of the community*, I'll let that charge slide."

Sam smiled a sly smile at Nick, winked, and headed back to his car. As he opened his door, he stopped and yelled to Nick, "Now you go straight home, Nick. You look like hell, like you could use about twenty-four hours of sleep."

Nick nodded his head in agreement, and went back to his own car, climbed in behind the wheel, and started the engine. He *would* go straight home, as soon as he had one more look in the alley behind the Main Street stores. One thing was certain, and he now knew it. The kid he had been chasing after was not Rich Donovan. Jerry's limp was from his damaged *left* leg, not his right. The kid he had been chasing after might not turn out to be Jerry, he didn't really see how it could, but it certainly wasn't the Donovan kid. He also had come to the realization that both times he had seen Jerry, or whoever, he had been going into that alley, or leaving it. One more look down the alley couldn't hurt anything, and it would only take an extra few minutes. If he hurried, he could still get home when expected, and still enjoy his birthday party.

## Chapter Two

After checking out the alley one last time, rather than take his usual, leisurely drive home, Nick had rushed up 47, as fast as he could safely drive. He knew Gayle and the kids would be anxiously awaiting him to begin his birthday celebration, and he didn't want to keep them waiting any longer than he already had. As it turned out, he arrived no more than ten minutes later than he ordinarily would have—on any *normal* day.

Today had certainly *not* been a normal day for him, beginning with his sighting of Jerry Smith, his preoccupation with him all day long, and his final and fruitless search of the alley before returning home. If today had been *normal*, he wanted no more normal days in his life from here on out. He was totally exhausted, from the tip of his toes to the hairs on his head, and his preoccupation with Jerry Smith was still lingering in the back of his mind. He just couldn't seem to put it to bed. *How could just seeing someone that I haven't even given two thoughts to in years, bug me like this?* But, Nick knew it was more than just *seeing* someone who *might* be Jerry that had impregnated his mind with the idea that Jerry Smith still existed as a teenager, walking the streets of Montrose. No, there was more to it than just that, *but what?* Had he finally pushed himself too hard, working too many long days, worrying over finances and the store? *Maybe*, he considered.

He parked his car in the garage and entered the house through the door into the kitchen. Gayle heard him enter, and turned from icing his birthday cake to greet him.

"Hi, honey, you're a little late. Bad day or good day?"

"I'm not sure yet, Gay. Sales were good, but it was a strange day, to say the very least, and I think I'll be getting a traffic ticket in the mail, unless Sam was just messin' with me."

"Traffic ticket?"

"It's a long story. Say, do you remember a kid from school named Jerry Smith?"

"Sure, he was a nice guy. He asked me out once, on a date."

"He did? I don't remember that."

"Well, I didn't go. I was dating you at the time, and I didn't mention it to you because I knew you liked the guy. I didn't want to start anything, if you know what I mean; you with the green eyes."

"Well, that little son-of-a...and you turned him down—good for you. Anyway, I thought I saw him today."

"Yeah, where?"

"In town, walking down High Street."

"Oh, I don't see how that could be, Nick."

"No, why not?"

"I heard he was in a terrible traffic accident some years ago, and he's permanently paralyzed; confined to a wheelchair."

"That's what Levi and Sam said too. How come I never heard about that?"

"Well, if I remember correctly, you were away in Nashville, at that hardware convention when it happened. I guess I just never thought to mention it to you after you got home."

"Or you did, and I just forgot about it. After the day I've had today, I wouldn't doubt that my mind's slipping away."

"What makes you say that? What happened today?"

"Oh, nothing I guess. Never mind for now. So, where are the kids?"

"The last time I checked, Adam was in his room, playing some computer game, and Emily was out back in her playhouse. But, don't you go changing the subject here, Nick. Tell me about today. You seem, so, so, I don't know, preoccupied maybe, with *something*. What's bothering you?"

Nick relinquished a relenting sigh, took a seat at the kitchen table, and went into the day's strange events, starting with his *first* sighting of Jerry Smith, and finishing with his encounter with Sam Coffey. He didn't mention his final inspection of the alleyway, sensing that Gayle was already thinking thoughts he'd rather not have her thinking. As he told her the story, even *he* thought he sounded crazy.

Gayle's first comment, after he had finished was, "I wonder if Jerry has a son?"

"A son," Nick questioned, "who inherited his hitch-step, which isn't inheritable? I don't think so, and besides, Jerry would have to have spawned him when he was twelve years old for his son to be seventeen or eighteen now. That's *not* the explanation, Gay."

"No, you're right. I wasn't thinking. Dumb idea. So, *how* do you explain it?"

"I don't. I have *no* idea how this kid, who *is* the spitting image of Jerry, keeps vanishing on me and gets from one place to another, on foot, faster than I can drive. I've *no* explanation that wouldn't land me in the funny farm."

"Nick, I think what you need is a good night's rest, and maybe a day off. Let's have your birthday party, because the kids are looking forward to it, and then you can go to bed. I'll call Levi and tell him you won't be in tomorrow. You can sleep late, get up whenever, and maybe take Adam and Emily fishing over at Waycross Park. How's that sound?"

"It sounds nice, but..."

"But nothing, Nick. *That* is exactly what you are going to do. We can't afford to have you run yourself down like this, worrying over nothing at all, and that's *my* final word on the matter."

As it turned out, that was the final word on the matter. Gayle finished icing Nick's cake and called the kids to the table. After finishing supper, everyone topped off their meal with cake and ice cream, and the kids gave Nick the presents they had made for him. Adam had made a crude little wooden box for his dad to keep his knickknacks in, and Emily, a pair of crocheted mittens, "For when it gets cold," she said, beaming with pride over her handiwork. As soon as the festivities were concluded, at Gayle's insistence, Nick went straight to bed. He didn't need much coaxing, in fact, none at all, and remembering Gayle's demand, he did *not* set his alarm before retiring.

Late morning greeted Nick with a sunny day, as he rolled over in bed and noted that it was nearly ten o'clock. *I've never slept this late in my life*, he thought, as he threw back the covers and sat upright on the edge of the bed. Gayle was already gone, probably up at her usual time of six thirty, time enough, ordinarily, to get the kids dressed, fed, and out for the arrival of the school bus. But this week was spring break for the kids, and Nick, eager for the opportunity to spend some time with them, dressed hurriedly, and rushed downstairs. After all, today was for relaxing and fishing, small pleasures he would never have set time aside for had it been solely up to him. But, in all matters related to anything other than the store, Gayle was the boss, and right now he was fine with that. He wanted no more days like yesterday, and a day's rest, he hoped, would insure against that.

When Nick got downstairs, he found Gayle in the kitchen, sitting at the table and staring out the window. He walked over, pulled out a chair, and sat down across from her.

"Whatcha lookin' at?" he asked her.

"Oh, nothing; just the kids. They're playing in the playhouse."

"Why so glum then?" he asked her, noticing the gloom over her.

"I was just thinking about you thinking you saw Jerry Smith yesterday..."

"Oh, not today, okay Gay? I really don't want to spoil today thinking about *him* again all day."

"He's dead, Nick."

"Who's dead?"

"Jerry."

"What? How do you know that?"

"When I called Levi last night, to tell him you wouldn't be in to work today, he told me. He said you asked him to check on Jerry, and his mom called Jerry's mom, and she said he had died."

"Jeezle, Gay, when, how? Did Jerry's mom say?"

"Yes, she said he died just last week, but as to how, they're not sure."

"Not sure?"

"She told Levi's mom that she just found him dead in his wheelchair one morning last week. According to Levi, his heart just stopped beating, but not the result of any coronary event, like a heart attack or the like. I asked Levi if it was a heart attack, and he said, 'No, it just stopped beating'."

"Is that possible?"

"I guess. I don't know, but that's what she told Levi's mom."

"Are you sure Levi got the story straight? You know Levi; he's not one-hundred percent reliable when it comes to remembering or understanding things."

"How would *I* be sure, Nick, but it seems to me that it's a pretty straight forward story. I don't see how Levi could get it wrong. He's not *that* simpleminded. Anyway, I guess you can stop worrying over who you saw yesterday. It sure wasn't Jerry, and that's all that should matter."

"Yeah, it is, isn't it? Maybe I should go into town though, and have a word with Levi about this. Just to be sure."

"You do what you want, Nick, but the kids will be disappointed. I already told them you were taking them fishing today."

"And I will, just as soon as I get back. It won't take long. I'll just get the story straight from Levi's lips, and see if he seems sure about what he's telling me. I'll be back home in an hour. Okay?"

"Like I said, do what you want, Nick. But-When you *do* get back home, I don't want to hear another word about Jerry."

She tried to hide it, but Nick saw the tear form at the corner of Gayle's eye.

"You *did* go out with Jerry. You didn't turn him down for that date after all, did you?"

"Yes, I did go out with him, and he was a damn nice guy. There, satisfied?"

"Hey, that was years ago. Why would you think you had to keep *that* from me now? I'd have cared then, a lot, but not now."

"Well *now* is when the subject came up. I don't know. I just don't want to discuss it any further. Let's just drop it. You go to town and talk to Levi if you must, but remember the kids will be waiting for you here. Don't disappoint them, Nick."

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Nick saw the red light from at least a quarter of a mile away. He slowed his car a little figuring to outlast its duration before getting to it and being forced to stop at the intersection of 47 and High Street. *That light never catches me more than once a month*, he thought, as it failed to turn green in what he thought was the appropriate amount of time. *Never*. But today, apparently it was going to catch him, despite his attempt to outwit it. "Damn!" he barked. He had been hoping to slide right through the intersection without even so much as a glance up High Street. Apparently, the traffic light had a different agenda in mind for him, *again*-today.

"Damn, why won't that damn light change," he blurted out, frustrated with the signal's lack of cooperation. He hadn't even reached town yet, and already the *late* Jerry Smith was invading his thinking and dictating his mood. He thought about just running the light, but he had probably racked up enough tickets yesterday to buy a week's worth of groceries. And besides that, with his luck, if he chanced it, a car full of nuns, or better yet grannies going to bingo, would probably enter the intersection at the same time he did.

He began braking, and slowed to a stop at the light, being careful to keep his eyes glued to the centerline ahead. The last thing he wanted this morning was to see *whoever* walking toward him on High Street again. He tried to will his peripheral vision to narrow, trying to visualize looking down a pipe to the center of Main Street. *What are you afraid of?* he questioned himself, but still he looked straight ahead. Then, the color blue, to his left, caught his attention. *Don't look*, he instructed himself, but he did, and there stood Jerry at the corner of High and the alley. He was just standing there, staring straight at him, and smiling. Then, he turned and began down the alleyway.

Nick floored the car, cutting the wheel to the left, in complete disregard for the lingering red light. He bolted through the intersection, and then cut to the right down the alley. Turning into the alley he floored the car again, and then slammed on the brakes. "Son-of-a-bitch!" he yelled, as he spotted Jerry sitting on the trunk lid of an old '69 Chevy Impala. Nick stared through the windshield at the boy, no more than twenty feet away from him, and muttered, "That *is* Jerry, dammit. I'd know that grin anywhere."

He took his eyes off Jerry for only a moment, as he reached for the door handle, but when he looked back again, Jerry had vanished. "Damn, I *must* be going crazy," he mumbled, or *I've already gone*. He released his grip on the door handle, pulled

the car back into gear, and slowly drove past the Impala, looking carefully for any sign of Jerry. There simply was none.

Nick pulled through the alley and drove to the store. He parked in his usual spot behind the hardware, and entered through the back door. Levi heard the tinkle of the bell attached to the door and looked up.

"Hey, Nicky, what are you doing here? Gayle said you were taking the day off."

"I am, Levi, but I wanted to talk to you about Jerry."

"Yeah, Jerry, too bad, huh?"

"Then it's true, he died last week?"

"Yeah, too bad. It was a...a...*anrism* his mom said. What is a *anrism*, Nicky?"

"It's an-*eur*-ism, Levi, and you didn't mention that to Gayle."

"I know. I did not want to sound dumb, because I do not know what a *an-eur*-ism is, Nicky. What if Gayle asked me and I did not know? What is it?"

"It's like a bubble in the wall of a blood vessel-in the brain. If the bubble breaks, you usually die."

"So, Jerry's bubble broke then?"

"Yeah, Levi. I guess it did, but what if I told you I saw him again today, on my way here?"

"I would say, 'Nicky, you are crazy,' is what I would say."

"Yeah, I thought so."

Nick was convinced that Levi had the story about Jerry correct. It was nothing Levi had said, but the way he had said it. Nick had learned a long time ago how to tell when Levi actually knew something and when he only *thought* he did.

"Okay, Levi. I'm gonna head home now. I'm taking the kids fishing today. Hold down the fort for me; you're doing a fine job, as usual."

Levi smiled broadly, blushed, and nodded his head. Nick turned and started for the back door, but Levi cut off his exit with a question.

"Oh, Nicky-did you hear about Marcus Parks's boys yet?"

Nick turned back, and asked, "The twins, Mark and Jody? No, what about them?"

"They went missing, Nicky. I am going to help find them after I close the store. I am going to join the search party."

"When did they go missing, and from where? Do you know, Levi?"

"Yesterday evening, from their own front yard."

"Did they just wander off, or do the police think they were taken by someone?"

"They were stolen, Nicky. Marcus said his neighbor saw a car pull up to their curb, and then the boys just got into the car, and then the car left with them."

"Could it have been someone the boys knew, like maybe a relative, or another neighbor?"

"They do not know, but Marcus said it was no one he knows. He has already checked with everyone he can think of, *and* the police already found the car Marcus's neighbor saw pick them up. They found it empty out by the woods in Waycross Park. That is where they are searching now."

"Jeez, that's bad," Nick said, thinking how he might feel if it were Adam and Emily that were missing. "I'll tell you what, Levi. If you want to go now and start searching for those boys, I'll stay and watch the store."

"What about your fishing trip?"

"I'm sure my kids will understand. They've played with Mark and Jody lots of times. They'll be glad you're out looking for them while I run the store, so go on now, get started."

Levi grinned from ear to ear, and then replied, "Gee, thanks Nicky." He was out the door before Nick could even ask him to check in later and let him know how the search was going.

"Oh well," Nick said, to the empty store, "I'm sure someone will come in later who knows what's going on out there." He picked up the phone to call home, just as it began ringing.

"Hello, Hines Hardware. Nick speaking."

"It's me, honey. Have you heard about Mark and Jody Parks yet?"

"Yeah, Gay, I just did. I was just about to call you about that. I let Levi leave to join in on the search, so I'll be watching the store today after all. Sorry. Will you explain it to Adam and Emily for me, please? I'm sure, under the circumstances, they'll understand."

"Sure, Nick, but why don't you just close up and join in on the search yourself? I'm sure your customers will understand. If it were their kids that were missing, they'd *expect* you to help out."

"I thought about it, but I'm the only hardware in town. What if the searchers need something I have here, like rope, or shovels, or something? They'd have to drive all the way to Chesterville if I'm closed, and that'd be a big waste of time."

"Well, whatever you decide to do, keep me posted. If you hear *anything*, call me, okay?"

"Sure, Gay, will do."

Nick hung up the phone, and gave more thought to his decision to man the store rather than close and join the search. His customers *would* understand if he closed, but then again, he still believed that the search teams might eventually need

equipment he had on hand here. His final decision was to hang in at the store and see what developed over the next few hours. If necessary, he'd even stay the night, should he be needed.

With no customers currently in the store, he sat down at the counter to work on his books. He was always behind on his paperwork, and this was a good opportunity to catch up some. It might also help him keep his mind off the Parks boys' situation, and maybe, hopefully, help him forget about Jerry Smith for a while. Ten minutes into his work, he thought he heard someone in the store, over behind the ladder racks.

*I didn't hear anyone come in*, he thought, and then he called out, "Hello, who's there? Can I help you?" He got no response from the other side of the store.

"Hello, is anyone there?"

His question elicited only the sound of a shoe scraping along the tile floor.

"What can I help you find?" Nick asked, as he stood, and walked around to the front of the counter. Again, he received no reply.

He reached around to the back of the counter and grabbed the baseball bat he kept there for *emergencies* like this, and started across the store toward the ladder racks. He heard the scrape of a shoe on tile again, and gripped the bat handle tightly. As he moved into position, to see behind the racks, he gasped and dropped the bat, as Jerry Smith came into view, sitting on a nail keg. He was no more than eight feet away and now there was *no mistaking* who he was looking at.

"Jerry?"

Jerry cocked his head at the sound of Nick's voice, and turned his head to face him directly. He smiled, and then stood. He paused a moment, and then turned and limped slowly to the back door of the store. Stopping at the door, he looked back at Nick, and then exited, turning left into the rear parking lot.

Nick was shaken. He had been a mere eight feet from who he had been seeing over the past two days, and in his mind, there was now no doubt at all that it was Jerry Smith, as *impossible* as that seemed to be. He moved slowly to the rear door and peered out to the left. He saw Jerry crossing Elm Street and entering the sidewalk boulevard that ran between Elm and Oak, and which ended directly across the street from the alleyway behind the Main Street storefronts.

"He's headed back to the alley again," Nick mumbled to himself, realizing immediately where the boulevard would take Jerry. *Why?* He considered following Jerry, and took a step out the door, as the phone inside began ringing. He turned back and ran to pick up the call.

"Hello, Hines Hardware," Nick answered.

"Nicky, you sound out of breath."

"Yeah, Levi, I am a bit. Where are you?"

"I'm searching. Marcus is here with me and he let me use his cell phone to call you. We are at the park."

"Okay, so what does Marcus need, Levi?"

"Nothing yet, but he wants to make sure you are going to be open if the search moves into the caves along Little Muddy. He says if we have to search in the caves, we will need lanterns. I told him we have lanterns at the hardware. He said how many, and I said I would call you and see."

Nick turned and looked at the shelf containing flashlights and the like.

"Tell Marcus I have two Coleman lanterns and six large flashlights. We also have a number of smaller flashlights if they can use them. Also tell him that I'll be here all night, if necessary."

"Okay, Nicky, I will tell him. Oh yeah, you know the car they found out here at the park. Well, it belongs to a registered sexfender named Jason Riggle, but there were *two* cars, Nicky. Sam Coffey says he found car tracks right next to Riggle's car, and he thinks Riggle might have switched cars, but he is not sure. It just *might* be, so we are still searching out here; he says for the boys he is afraid, not Riggle. What does *that* mean, Nicky?"

"It means that Sam thinks Riggle may have left the area already, and that he probably left the boys there in the park somewhere."

"Oh, okay. Then I have to go look some more. Bye, Nicky."

The line went dead before Nick had the chance to prepare Levi for what he had meant by Riggle leaving the boys in the park. *Maybe he already knows*, Nick thought. *Sometimes he knows more than you think he does.*

Nick started thinking about what Levi had said about a second car, and then his mind drifted back to Jerry Smith, heading down the boulevard to the alley. He pulled a piece of paper and a black marker from a drawer beneath the counter, and began writing, "Back in 10 Minutes." He pulled a piece of tape from the dispenser, walked to the front door, and hung the sign in the door window. He did not lock the door, just in case someone needed something in a hurry. Everyone in Montrose knew Nick's credit system for such emergencies; just leave a note on the counter, and you could pay the bill later.

Nick headed across his parking lot and across Elm Street, entering the boulevard sidewalk at a slow jog. At the far end of the walk, the Oak Street end, he stopped and looked across Oak and down the alley. He took a deep breath, and crossed Oak, entering the alley at a walk, and then he began jogging again.

As he approached the back of Obert Pharmacy, he spotted the old Chevy Impala he had seen Jerry sitting on earlier this morning. At the sight of the Chevy still parked there, he stopped, and then began walking slowly toward it. Circling around to the back of the car, he noticed the lack of a license plate on the vehicle, and when he looked up, there was Jerry, sitting *again* on the trunk. He smiled at Nick, and then vanished before his eyes.

"What the hell?" Nick said, shaking his head to clear it. "I *am* going nuts."

He moved forward to the side of the Impala and looked inside. The car was full of garbage, like old fast food cups, sandwich wrappers, and wadded up paper bags, a foot deep on all the floorboards, front, and rear. Other than that, there was nothing remarkable about the otherwise empty interior of the car. He moved to the front side and peered through the windshield at the car's VIN tag. Pulling his notepad and pen from his shirt pocket, he jotted down the VIN number, and headed back to the hardware.

Back at the store he pulled Marcus's cell phone number from the caller ID on his telephone, and dialed.

"Hello, Marcus Parks."

"Hi, Marcus, it's Nick Hines. How's it going?"

"Slow, Nick; it's going very slow. What can I do for you?"

"First, let me tell you how sorry I am that this is happening."

"Thanks, and thanks for letting Levi join us out here."

"Sure, but is Sam there with you?"

"Yeah, nearby. Do you need to talk to him?"

"Yes, I think I do. It may be nothing, but I need to run something by him."

"About my boys?"

"Yes, maybe, but I can't be sure; not until I talk to Sam that is."

"Hold on then while I get him."

Nick hoped he wasn't chasing a figment of his imagination, or a delusion his own mind had dreamt up, as he slowly slipped into insanity, but he had to say something. As he thought about how crazy he would sound if he even *thought about* mentioning Jerry, Sam came on the line.

"Nick? What's up?"

"Hey, Sam. Levi told me you think there's a second car involved in the boys' disappearance. Is that true?"

"Yes, why?"

"Can you run a VIN number from out there?"

"Yes, and again, why?"

"Just take down this number, Sam, *run it* and get back to me with the owner's name, okay? It may be important."

Sam sensed the urgency in Nick's voice, and replied, "Okay, Nick. Where are you calling from?"

"The store. Do you know the number?"

"Yeah, I have it. Give me the VIN and I'll get back to you in five."

Nick read off the VIN number from the Impala, and then hung up. This was probably about to become the longest five minutes of his life. Seven minutes later—he was *sure* of it. In all, it took Sam about ten minutes to get back to him, and the news wasn't good.

"Who?" Nick asked, as Sam told him who owned the Chevy Impala.

"Olive Hays."

"Damn!"

"What's wrong, Nick? Who'd you expect it to belong to?"

"Jason Riggle, that's who."

"Where did you get the VIN number, and why the VIN instead of the plate number?"

"There was no plate on the car, that's why, and it's parked out behind Obert Pharmacy, but I guess it's nothing after all."

"What made you think it might be, Nick? Maybe what you're *not* telling me is *more important* than what you are."

Nick knew he couldn't tell Sam what his thoughts had really been, nor how he had come to the conclusions he had, so he did the only thing he could do—he lied.

"Think about it, Sam. It has no license plate, it's been parked behind the pharmacy for at least two days, and it's literally full of garbage; fast food trash a foot deep on all the floors. It just looked suspicious to me."

"Okay, that's a good call. That would make *me* suspicious too. Do me a favor, Nick. Go keep an eye on it and I'll drop by there shortly to have a look at it."

"Good, Sam. I will, and thanks. I hope it's not a wild goose chase, but..."

"Yeah, but...better safe than sorry, right?"

"Yeah, Sam, right."

Nick went back out the back door, leaving his away sign in the front door window, and got into his car. If he was going to keep an eye on the Impala, and someone decided to leave with it, he would have to be able to follow along. He pulled out onto Elm, turned left and then right onto Main, circling the boulevard to Oak. When he reached the Oak Street entrance to the alley, he pulled in and drove to where he could park with a clear view of the Chevy Impala. He found a good spot, parked, and then began his vigil. Five minutes later, he was nodding

off, his eyes heavy. Somewhere between five and ten minutes into his watch, he fell asleep, just for a moment, and then he suddenly awoke with a start. As he focused again on the Impala, there was Jerry, sitting on the trunk lid again, smiling his way. For whatever reason, Nick raised his hand and waved to Jerry. To his surprise, Jerry returned the gesture, and then disappeared from sight.

By now, Nick had the very strong impression that the owner of the Impala was somehow involved in the disappearance of the Parks boys. If not the owner, then someone the owner knew. Sam had not mentioned that the vehicle was listed as stolen, so he doubted that it was. But somehow, in some way, there must be a connection between the car's owner and the kidnapping of Mark and Jody Parks. He barely had time to think this through when Sam's police cruiser came busting into the alleyway, lights flashing, and siren blaring. He skidded to a stop behind the Impala, as Nick exited his car and began running toward Sam. Sam saw him coming, and yelled, "I just found out that Olive Hays is Jason Riggle's sister!"

"His *sister*?" Nick yelled back.

"Yes, and we've got to cordon off this area and start a search of all of these buildings. The rest of the search team is on the way, and I've also called in the county police. They'll be sendin' a few men to help, shortly."

"So you think the boys may have been brought here; that they're in one of these buildings?"

"That's right, Nick. Old Delbert Hays, Olive's father-in-law, once owned most of these buildings. For all I know he may still own some of them to this day. If so, Riggle may have access to them."

Nick thought about that for a moment, and then responded, "Sam, check the Impala's trunk first."

Sam looked at Nick with a most curious look, but said nothing.

"It's just a hunch, Sam, but check the trunk first."

Still not saying a word, Sam walked back to his cruiser and retrieved a tire iron from the trunk. He walked back to the Impala and inserted the iron between the body and the trunk lid, and then turned his head to face Nick. He had a very worried, almost sick look on his face.

"Nick, go to my car, get on my radio and call for an ambulance and paramedics. Get them started on their way here, now."

Nick did as Sam had requested, keeping an eye on Sam, as he began trying to pry the lock on the Impala trunk. The trunk lid gave Sam a whole lot more trouble than he had expected, and Nick was back from the call before he had made any serious progress.

"Here, Sam, let me give it a try."

Nick took the tire iron and with one swift motion jabbed it straight through the lock tumbler, punching it out, leaving a hole in the trunk lid. He then took his finger and inserted it in the hole, found what he was feeling for, and the lid popped open. He smiled at Sam, and said, "I had to do this once before, a long time ago." Sam smiled back, and replied, "I'm glad."

They each took a step back, as Sam raised the lid, and they both rushed forward again at what they saw inside the trunk. There, each curled up in a fetal position, were Mark and Jody Parks—motionless, silent, and apparently dead.

"Oh no," Nick whimpered, as he reached in, lifted Mark out, and laid him flat on the pavement. It didn't take a doctor to tell Nick that they were too late. Mark was stiff, rigor mortis having already set in.

Sam, on the other hand, was frantically working over Jody, administering CPR, and praying the ambulance would arrive soon. Jody had survived somehow, apparently right up to the moment they had been opening the trunk. He was still warm and supple, but nonetheless dead—and Sam was trying desperately to reverse that outcome. It was probably three or four minutes into Sam's efforts that the paramedics arrived with life-giving oxygen, and a resuscitator. They took over immediately, as they prepared to transport Jody to Chesterville Memorial Hospital. No one argued when both Sam and Nick announced that they would be riding along.

The paramedics continued to work on Jody, as the ambulance sped toward Chesterville, providing him with oxygen and pumping his heart for him with professional skill and care. It was probably about halfway to the hospital that Jody took over for himself, as his heart started beating on its own again. Three quarters of the way there, he awoke from his forced slumber, and opened his eyes. He looked around the ceiling of the ambulance, and then at each of the concerned men around him. He tried to speak through the oxygen mask, but his words were indiscernible, so one of the medics carefully removed the mask.

"Hi, Mr. Hines," were the first words out of Jody's mouth.

"Hi, Jody," Nick replied, tears running down his cheeks.

"Hi, Sheriff Coffey."

"Hi, Jody," Sam greeted the boy, equally moved at his recovery.

"Where is Mark? Did you get *him* out too?"

Sam and Nick looked at each other, and then Sam answered, "Yes, Jody, we got him out too. He's in another ambulance."

"Okay, good, did you get Jerry out too?"

Sam looked at Nick, shrugging his shoulders, and then asked, "Did we *overlook* someone back there?"

Nick, who was totally dumbfounded by Jody's question, replied, "I don't think so, Sam."

Directing his attention back to Jody, Nick asked, "Jody, who's Jerry?"

"The other kid in the trunk. Didn't you see him?"

"Ah, yes, but we don't know who he is. Did the bad man put him in the trunk too?"

"I don't think so, he was already there, I think."

"Did he talk to you?" Nick asked.

"Sure, and he told us how to stay alive in the trunk. He said not to talk, to breathe small breaths only, and not to move around. He said we had to save our air, and *that* was the only way to save it. I guess he was right, huh?"

"Yes, he was, Jody. Now you rest easy, okay? The doc here is going to put the air mask back on you now so you can get *lots* of good air. We'll talk again later."

By now, Sam was so confused he didn't even know *what* to ask Nick first. He finally settled for, "Who the hell is Jerry?"

"You heard Jody; the *other* kid in the trunk."

"*What* other kid?"

"Hell if I know, Sam. I haven't got a clue."

Hoping that Sam wouldn't put together this event, and his *interest* in Jerry Smith at the Donovan's house yesterday, Nick added, "All kids have imaginary friends, Sam. Jerry is probably just one of Jody's."

Sam thought for a moment, and then shot back a look that said, *I wonder*.

## Chapter Three

Nick had chosen to keep the identity of Jerry, the *other* kid in the trunk, a secret from Sam, and anyone else who had asked. It wasn't that he wanted to keep it to himself; he wished he *could* share it with someone, but who would believe him? Who could he tell that wouldn't think him absolutely, off the wall, crazy? As it stood now, only Gayle knew the whole story, and Nick wasn't one hundred percent sure that even she believed him. All he knew about what she was thinking was that she wasn't laughing at him, and that, at least, was *some* consolation.

It really didn't seem to matter, one way or the other, because Jerry seemed to have gone elsewhere to do his bidding. Nick had not seen him again in nearly two months, not since the abduction of Mark and Jody Parks.

Even knowing what he did, Nick still didn't understand it all; how it had happened that a young Jerry Smith had come back from the grave to save Jody Parks. He just chalked it all up to some sort of divine intervention, the work of an angel, a guardian angel, or perhaps even God Himself. He had no idea, but what he did know was that he had been too slow on the take up of what was happening. If he had been a little sharper, he might have been able to save Mark as well. He had mentioned this concern to Sam, not revealing exactly how he had known what he had known. Sam had assured him that had he come up with the info, even eight hours earlier, it would *still* have been too late to save Mark. Nick prayed Sam was right.

Of course, Nick hoped that no other children from their community would ever be abducted again, but if it *did* happen again, and he was given another opportunity to help, he'd be on top of it the next time. He'd know *why* Jerry was here, if he should show up again, and he'd be ready to act. Another matter he still wasn't sure of though was why Jerry had chosen *him* to come to, and for that matter, why it was *Jerry* who had come. Surely, whoever had sent Jerry had as many choices, as there were dead people from the beginning of time. Nick did have a partial handle on it, in as much as *if* it was to be him who was chosen to help, then whoever was sent would have to be someone he had known at one time. Otherwise, he'd have never noticed him in the first place. *Conjecture and guesses*, Nick thought, as he mulled over the possibilities. *Conjecture and guesses*.

As far as the town of Montrose was concerned, the incident, as bad as it was, had ended and life went on. But, the lesson was well learned, and parents everywhere in the area watched their children more closely from that day forward. *What* they had learned was that things like this could happen anywhere; even in

Montrose. Now, sixty days after the fact, it was a rare occasion to see a child, or even a group of children, playing alone without an adult watching them closely, from just a few feet away.

Although Nick didn't realize it, the event also had a profound effect on Levi. Nick didn't realize it because Levi never mentioned the abduction again, or Jerry, after Jody had been rescued. It took Nick totally by surprise when Levi suddenly asked him, "Why did he come back, Nicky?"

Nick looked up from the key he was cutting, and asked, "Why did *who* come back, Levi?"

"Jerry."

Nick turned off the key cutting machine and smiled at Levi.

"I thought you said I was crazy to believe I had seen him. Now you suddenly believe he came back too?"

"People make fun of me sometimes, Nicky. You know that. Well, I am not dumb you know. I know what people would say if I said I thought Jerry came back after his bubble broke. They would say, 'Levi is crazy.' And I am *not* you know."

"I know that Levi, but why would you hide what you believe from me? Have I ever made fun of you, or called you crazy?"

"No, but I thought maybe I was crazy, when Jerry came to see me."

"What?"

"Yes, he came to see me."

"When?"

"That day, out in the woods, when I was looking for the boys. He said I was not looking in the right place. He told me about the car behind the drugstore, and he wanted me to tell you."

"Why didn't you then?"

"I was afraid."

"Of what?"

"Of being called a dummy and crazy. I ran away from him and hid behind a tree."

Nick thought for a minute, and then asked, "So, he actually *talked* to you?"

"Yes, and he said he was afraid you were not getting his message. That is why he talked to me."

"Well, Levi, you're *not* crazy; you're special."

"How come?"

"Because Jerry *talked* to you, that's why."

"He did not talk to you?"

"Nope, he only tried to get me to follow him, is the way I figure it, but he never spoke a word to me. Like I said, I guess you're special."

"I do not think I want to be special, Nicky. Not with Jerry, I mean."

"Well, I wouldn't worry about it, Levi. Jerry is gone and it's all behind us now."

Nick flicked the key cutting machine back on and went back to finishing the order Oliver Holmes had placed this morning. It seemed that Oliver was having trouble lately with kids breaking into his vacant farm buildings. He had stopped by the store at seven sharp and ordered all new locks, hasps, and an extra set of keys for each new lock. Nick had told him he was wasting his money, that the kids would get into the buildings anyway, but Oliver insisted. He also insisted that Nick install them all if he wanted the sale. Nick wanted the sale, so he had agreed, despite one last attempt to have Oliver see the futility of it all. Oliver's last word on the matter had been, "I know they'll get in anyway, Nick. But, if I do the prevention the insurance company requires, I'm covered if those little bastards burn the place down." Nick had no argument for that, and agreed to come out this afternoon and install the eight hasps and locks Oliver had ordered. Since it was Saturday, Oliver's demands had necessitated calling Levi down from his apartment to cover the store for the afternoon.

He finished cutting the last of the extra keys, and called to Levi, who was installing a new screen in Mrs. Cutler's front screen door. Levi came running, as he always did when called to the front.

"Yes, Nicky?"

"I'm finished cutting Oliver's keys, so I'm heading out to his old farm to install the new locks. Plan on closing the store tonight yourself. I'll go straight home from Oliver's place when I finish. It's out beyond my place a little ways, so I'll be practically home when I finish out there."

"Okay," Levi replied, "and tomorrow is Sunday, so I will open in the morning, right?"

"Yep, that's right, Levi. So, I'll see you Monday then, and thanks for coming down today to help out."

"Okay, Nicky, and do not forget to take the battery drill. You will need it. Oh yeah, and take a screwdriver too."

Nick smiled. He *had* been about to run off without the drill.

"You know, Levi, that's one of the reasons I keep you here. I'd probably forget my head if it wasn't attached."

"Yeah, what is the other reason?"

Nick laughed, and replied, "Because you are the most reliable and hard-working employee I've ever had."

"Gee, thank you, Nicky. What is the other, other reason?"

"You think there's more?"

"Uh huh, it is because you like me, right?"

"Yes, Levi, that *is* the other, other reason. See ya Monday, buddy."

Nick left Levi beaming, and headed out the back door to the parking lot. It was true though, *that was* the other, other reason. He started his car and began the long drive out to Oliver Holmes's vacant farm. No one, including himself, understood why Oliver kept holding onto it since he moved in with his daughter and her husband in Montrose, but hold onto it he did. The other confusing thing about the situation was that he wouldn't even consider renting it out. Other farmers in the area had made him offers, but he stubbornly refused to discuss it. Although he would never admit it, there were those who suspected that he was holding out in the vain hope that his son would one day decide to move back to the area and farm it. But, everyone of that opinion knew better. Successful lawyers don't quit their practices, move to the country, and plant corn. It just wasn't going to happen.

Nick didn't waste any time in getting out to the farm. It was getting late in the afternoon, and he didn't particularly relish the idea of a cold supper, if he should arrive home later than expected. As he pulled into the drive at Oliver's farm, he found himself wishing he had called Gayle before leaving the store. If she was expecting him to be late, she would postpone supper until he got there. But, there was nothing to be done about it now. There were no phones out here, and he still had not abandoned his resistance to carrying a cell phone. A cold dinner was now imminent, along with a cold shoulder, if he didn't hurry and get this done.

He decided to start with the front, rear, and cellar doors on the main house, and then move from there to the barn, where there were four doors to secure. The final lock was to go on the grain silo, which was, according to Oliver, a favorite drinking place for the local teens. By the time Nick started installing the last lock, he was convinced that Oliver had been right. The kids *would* probably burn this place down one day. He had counted no less than five hundred empty beer cans inside the house and the barn, and the kids had built several *campfires* on the floor of the barn, obviously built to keep warm when they partied there in the winter.

Nick looked at his watch, as he finished installing the silo door lock, and noted that he had made good time, better than he had expected. He still had twenty minutes to get home on time, and he was, at most, only ten minutes away from his house. He walked back to his car and put his tools away in the trunk, before getting behind the wheel. He closed the car door, started the engine, and headed back to the main road, stopping at the

end of the drive and looking both ways down Route 47 to be sure the way was clear. He started to pull out, and then suddenly, he had a thought that stopped him. He glanced into his rearview mirror, and looked back at the barn, trying to remember if he had *actually* secured the lock he had installed on the man-door. He couldn't remember doing it, and that bugged him into backing up to check it out. The last thing he wanted was to be the cause of Oliver's insurance company not paying off if the damn place burned to the ground. Just as a precaution, he decided to check all the locks, starting with the cellar door on the house. He backed up the drive to alongside the cellar door, and muttered, "Good thing I checked; I must be losing it." The padlock was hanging, open, from the hasp. He corrected his oversight and started to get back in the car, when he heard a noise coming from an upstairs window of the house; a noise that sounded like someone tapping on a pane of glass. Slowly, he raised his eyes, and saw a young boy standing in the window. Through the glare on the glass, the boy was indistinct, and he squinted against the glare to see him more clearly. He took two steps sideways, which reduced the glare, and he nearly screamed, as the boy came into focus. He bit down on his tongue to stop himself from doing so, and then he felt himself collapsing, as all around him went black.

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When Nick next opened his eyes, the first thought that came to mind was a name. "Eddie," he muttered, and looked up to the blackness of a night sky. He realized right away that he had fainted at the sight of the boy in the window. He quickly glanced up at the window, but if the boy was still standing there, it was too dark to see him now. *No, it couldn't have been Eddie*, he told himself, and stood facing the window. "Eddie!" he screamed, but there was no response.

Not at all sure of what was happening to him, or of his mental state in particular, he bolted for his still running car, jumped in, and floored it. Fortunately, it hadn't run out of gas while he lay unconscious on the ground. He slid onto 47 from the farm road without even looking to see if the road was clear, and then he floored the car again. He had taken Jerry Smith's appearance in stride, or at least he had thought he had, but this...this was too much.

He pushed his car at breakneck speed, arriving home in a matter of a few minutes, and slid to a stop in front of the house. As he flew through the front door, Gayle came running from the kitchen, screaming, "Where have you been, Nick? We've

been worried sick about you." He blew right past Gayle and into the den, where he picked up the telephone and began dialing.

Gayle followed him into the den, and said to him as he was dialing, "Nick? What's wrong?" But he shushed her, and kept on dialing. He waited, impatiently tapping his fingers on the desk while the phone rang at the other end, and then, "Montrose Police Department."

"Yeah, Nells, this is Nick Hines, and I need to speak to Sam *right now*."

Nick knew that this was no time to procrastinate, not after the last time.

"Well, Nick, Sam's out lookin' for you. Where've ya been?"

"Not now, Nells. Can you get word to Sam to meet me at Oliver Holmes's old farmhouse out here on 47? It's urgent."

"Sure, but can I tell him why?"

"You don't *know* why, Nells, and I don't have time to tell you why. Just get on it, okay?"

"Okay...okay, I'm on it, grump."

"One more thing, Nells. I know Jason Riggle was never caught, but do we know his last known whereabouts?"

"Not that I'm aware of, and I'm sure I'd have heard if we did. He could be anywhere, for all we know."

Nick hung up the phone and blew out a long breath.

"Now will you tell me what's going on," Gayle asked, "and where the hell you've been?"

"I'm sorry, Gay. I was out at Oliver Holmes's old place, installing locks for him..." *Should I tell her what really happened?* "...and for some reason I passed out in the side yard of the farmhouse. I don't know why; maybe it was the heat. I didn't wake up until just a few minutes before I got home."

Gayle studied Nick's face with skepticism, and asked, "Then what's the big emergency? Why do you need to meet Sam out there in such a big hurry?"

Nick knew *busted* in Gayle's voice when he heard it, and he was hearing it right now. If his story was true, then what was the big hurry?

"Okay, Gay, there was more to it than that, but I really don't have time to go into it now. There *really* may be an emergency out there at Oliver's place. It's just a hunch, but I've got to play it out. I can't let happen again, what happened to Mark Parks."

"Mark Parks?" Gayle asked, but Nick had already turned and left the room. "Oh, no, not again," she whispered.

Nick arrived at the Holmes farm before Sam, but he could hear Sam's siren in the distance, headed his way. He parked by the farmhouse, facing his car toward the drive, and he left the headlights on so that Sam could find him easily, and without

delay. If he was right about what seeing Eddie meant, there might not be much time to waste. Had another angel, or whatever, intervened again? Was there a child or maybe *two* again, upstairs in that farmhouse, frightened and cold? Was Jason Riggle still up there too? He was taking no chances this time, and he was moving fast. Jerry Smith had failed to get the message across to him in time to do Mark Parks any good, but Eddie had conveyed the message loud and clear. *Maybe Eddie's death wasn't pointless after all. Maybe he drowned for a reason. Maybe this is the reason.* Nick's mind was full of all sorts of possibilities, as he watched Sam's car approach up the drive.

"Hey, Sam," Nick hailed, as Sam got out of his cruiser.

"So what's the emergency, Nick, and where the hell have you been all evening?"

"I've been right here, except when I went home to phone you. We have to check out this house for a missing child, or children, but we have to be careful that Riggle isn't still in there."

"What? What missin' kids?"

"Aren't there any? There must be, I saw Eddie, just like I saw Jerry."

"Are you okay, Nick? You're talkin' in circles again, just like back at Donovan's house. You're not back to thinkin' you saw *Jerry Smith* again, are you?"

"I *did* see him, Sam. That's the whole point. It was Jerry who showed me where the Parks boys were stashed in that car trunk. And now I've seen Eddie, which means there may be someone stashed in that house. Don't you see? Jerry Smith was the other kid Jody talked about being with in the trunk. See?"

Sam was getting really worried about Nick with every other word he spoke. He took Nick by both his arms and set him down on his car hood.

"Now look, Nick. After our last little discussion about Jerry, I did some checkin' on him. Seems that at the time you *thought* you saw him, he was dead, just recently dead, but dead nonetheless. Now you want me to believe that after that, he told you where to find the Parks boys? Come on, Nick, listen to yourself. You're talkin' crazy."

"I *know*, Sam, but can we just check the house, please. I don't want to be late again, not like last time."

"Last time-you saved a boy's life, Nick."

"And last time, I *lost* one too. Please, Sam."

Sam Coffey was not a man who wasted time lightly, but he could see that whatever it was that had Nick by the horns, really had him good. He gave it a moment's thought, and then said, "Okay, Nick, if it will put an end to this foolishness, we'll go have a look inside."

"Nick smiled, and replied, "What about Riggle? What if he's still in there?"

"Did you see a car anywhere around here; in the barn or behind it, or anywhere, Nick?"

"Well, no."

"Then I doubt very seriously if Jason Riggle is here. You can't abduct a kid and then *walk him* to where you plan to take him."

Nick saw the logic in that, and replied, "Well, come on then. We've got to check upstairs first. That's where I saw Eddie."

Nick rushed ahead of Sam to the front door of the farmhouse, and fumbled for the key to the new lock he had just installed there. He had color-coded all the keys for Oliver's convenience, and now, as he mumbled, "Green key, green key" he was glad he had. He located the green key, unlocked the padlock, and pushed the door in. *Whew, musty*, he thought, as he entered, Sam right behind him, and then he stopped cold, staring up the front stairway.

"Problem?" Sam asked.

"No, I'm just afraid of what we'll find up there."

"Well, we won't find anything standin' here."

Nick took the hint and moved to the bottom of the stairs. He took a deep breath and started up. As he neared the top of the staircase, he stopped again, and turned back to Sam.

"God, do you smell that odor? What is *that*? It smells like something dead."

"It is, and it sure ain't just a rat," Sam said, as he rushed past Nick, topped the last step, and turned left down a hall. After a short moment, Nick followed. He looked down the hallway and saw that Sam had vanished.

"Sam! Where'd you go?" he called out.

"I'm in the bedroom at the end of the hall to the right, but maybe you better just stay where you are, Nick. I don't think you'll want to see this."

By now, Nick was beginning to gag on the odor coming from down the hall Sam had followed to the bedroom. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, placed it over his mouth and nose, and thought, *Maybe not, but there's no way I'm staying here*. Nick moved forward, and turned into the bedroom at the end of the hall. He took one look at the body in the corner, and vomited his full measure on the floor. Turning from the sight, he ran down the stairs to the front door, and then out to the front lawn. There, he fell to his hands and knees and retched until he thought he would pass out.

When he gained control of himself, he rolled over to his back and stared up at the full moon. "Why, why, why?" he asked

whomever might be listening up there. He received no answer to what he was asking; "Why even later this time-than the last?" What he had seen, bound and gagged in the corner of the bedroom, was a small body, probably a boy, and extremely decomposed. "Why even later this time-than the last?"

Suddenly, as he stared up at the black of the night sky, Sam loomed above him.

"Well, he's not from around here. His name is Mitch Richards, and he was from Chesterville."

"How...How do you know that?"

"He had a little wallet in his jeans with a handwritten ID in it."

"How long has he been dead, Sam? Can you tell?"

"Not exactly, but I'd say probably at least three months. He's been missin' for over four. I have a bulletin on him back at the station."

Sam sat down next to Nick on the weedy, overgrown lawn. Silence fell between them for over two minutes before Sam asked, "Who's Eddie?"

"Eddie...Eddie was my little brother."

"Was?"

"He drowned when he was nine. That was before you came here, Sam. The only time in my whole lifetime that Creed's Pond has ever frozen solid, I had to see what it was like to go ice skating. I was eleven then, and of course I didn't own any ice skates, no one in Montrose did, but I went slipping and sliding around like I did. Well, whatever I did, Eddie had to do too, and he did, but he fell through the ice. I was bigger and heavier, but it was *him* that fell through. Go figure."

"Ouch, that's rough," Sam said, "and of course you blamed yourself."

"Yeah, I did, for a long time."

"And, you say you saw him here, today?"

"Yes, in an upstairs window, after I finished working on Oliver's locks."

"Huh-Well, I've got to go call this in. You want to stay here, or come along back to my car with me?"

"Can I just go on home?"

"Yeah, I guess so. I can get your statement later."

"Good, 'cause I've got a lot of explaining to do to Gayle."

"Well, quite frankly Nick, you've got a lot of explainin' to do to *me* too. I'll be callin' you in the mornin'."